Common Core and the Smarter Balanced Tests

Many citizens and educators are frightened by the pace of putting into place the Common Core curriculum and the Smarter Balanced test. I speak to their reaction from the perspective of having lived through the implementation of high stakes state standards in four different states starting with Florida in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Most recently, I was in charge of creating the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) starting in 1993, now regarded as one of the best statewide, standards based test systems in the United States.

Peoples' fears in Connecticut are based on several concerns. They are afraid that students will not be adequately prepared for the Smarter Balanced tests. They are afraid that teachers will not have had adequate training to know how to teach Common Core skills and knowledge effectively. They are afraid that if students do not score well on the Smarter Balanced tests and get good grades, their children will not be able to attend the college of their choice, including the University of Connecticut and other tier one colleges like Yale, Harvard and Columbia.

Educators are very concerned that we are moving too quickly to establish a high stakes teacher and administrator evaluation system. They know that if their students perform poorly over several years their jobs could be in jeopardy.

They are concerned that their performance will be measured against a series of tests that will not have been used over a long enough period to be seen as both reliable and valid as measures of student achievement. They know very well that it is proposed that at least half of the testing measure of a teacher's performance would be gauged against a standardized test.

How do we proceed, given these fears?

First, we need a much better way of explaining what the Common Core of Learning is. It is nothing new. In the late 1970's, the higher level thinking and problem solving skills built into the Common Core were an integral part of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Bloom's Taxonomy is a way of classifying the levels of difficulty in knowledge and skills taught in classrooms, from simple like "identifying" to much more difficult such as "applying" and "evaluating."

Second, it is my view that the State and the Legislature would be well served to take a couple of steps.

1) Set up a three year implementation time line for both the Common Core of Learning and the Smarter Balanced tests to allow sufficient training of teachers, and teaching of students.

2) Do the same for making the teacher and administrator evaluation systems high stakes.

These steps would allow the Smarter Balanced tests to be piloted and modified and made reliable and valid. They would also give sufficient time to build familiarity and student achievement. And they would give sufficient time for teacher and administrator evaluation systems to be fine-tuned. In the end, all involved would become more comfortable with the important tools being built to prepare students for life in the 21st century and vitally important educator and student accountability.

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